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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000570

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SUBJECT: A NEW SUNNI ARAB COALITION THAT CALLS ITSELF NATIONALIST

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Classified By: PolMinCouns Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On March 1, ex-Council of Representatives (COR) speaker Mahmoud Mashhadani joined the leaders of three political blocs, Saleh al-Mutlak (Iraqi Front for National Dialogue/IFND), Abid Mutlak al-Jeboori (Iraqi Arab Independents), and Khalaf al-Ulyan (National Dialogue Council) to announce that they were joining forces to form a new coalition. While the makeup of the new coalition is currently only Sunni Arab, the group said it is open to anyone with a similar national agenda who wants to join. Hassan Deghan al-Janabi, also a member of al-Ulyan's group, confirmed to us that the purpose of the new coalition in part is to create a national secular base for the upcoming national elections. The new coalition is also a vehicle for Mashhadani's return to the parliament and perhaps even to the speaker's podium, although the highly politicized circumstances of his departure make that scenario unlikely (reftel). END SUMMARY

A New National-Secular Coalition

¶2. (U) The new coalition, currently called the National Project, brings together approximately 24 current MPs who are from existing (Sunni Arab) parties. Although the political leaders announced that the group is open to all ethnic and religious sects, membership is currently exclusively Sunni Arab. Hassan Deghan al-Janabi from the Dialog Council informed poloff that the purpose of the new coalition was to create a national secular base for the upcoming national elections. He said the January 2009 provincial elections showed that the Iraqi people were tired of sectarian and ethnic division, and want a single Iraqi identity. The new National Project coalition, he told poloff, responded to this desire. Although currently using the same name as Sunni Arab politico Saleh Mutlak's moderately successful provincial election list, al-Janabi was not sure how long the coalition would retain this name. He said they would reach out to secular Shia groups to join the coalition, and specifically referenced participants in the July 22nd group as potential partners. (Comment: the July 22nd group's Shia were mostly Shia Islamists from the Sadr and Fadila parties. It is far from certain those Shia Islamists would walk far with Sunni Arabs like al-Janabi which is why the July 22nd group has never been cohesive. End Comment.)

The Return of the King, or the Jester?

¶3. (C) When poloff asked if the purpose of the coalition was also a rehabilitation of Mashadani, al-Janabi acknowledged that this was the case. The Dialog Council, of which Mashadani is a member, will seek to fill Mashadani's vacant parliamentary seat with Mashadani himself. Al-Janabi was unaware of any prohibitions against such an action. Al-Janabi, although acknowledging some difficulties with the plan, also said the NDC planned to submit Mashadani's name as

an alternate candidate to fill the Sunni Arab-designated speaker's position. Moreover, Saleh al-Mutlak reported that one of the goals of the new coalition was to oppose Ayad al-Samarraie (Tawafuq/IIP) as the next parliament speaker.

Comment

¶4. (C) The formation of the new national secular coalition by the three Sunni Arab parties appears to be part of an emerging trend in which political groups are tapping into the "national secular identity" campaign message. Hassan Deghan al-Janabi was quite specific in identifying this as one of the reasons for the National Project coalition. He and other Qthe reasons for the National Project coalition. He and other Sunni Arab leaders have told poloff that they recognize that secular nationalism was a successful message for the top vote-getters in the January 2009 provincial elections. It appears that Iraqi political parties are taking lessons from the victors.

¶5. (C) Given the circumstances surrounding Mashadani's removal as speaker, and the animosity he generated from Tawafuq, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Kurds, in addition to a fully cross-sectarian selection of female MPs, his return to the speaker's chair is unlikely. A court case in January from the Federal Court cleared the way for Mashadani to return as a member, albeit without the very generous pension that was negotiated as part of his resignation agreement. Mashadani may be confident in his ability to regain the speaker's chair, thus making the pension moot. Alternatively, he simply may be seeking a route back to public relevance, given that he has played little or

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no public role since his resignation.
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